

Statement of

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BOAT/U.S.

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880 S. Pickett St., Alexandria, Virginia 22304

Before the

Committee on Homeland Security

Subcommittee on Economic Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Cybersecurity

of the

U.S. House of Representatives

Re: Recreational Boater Streamlined Inspection Act (H.R. 1509)

May 19, 2005

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am Jim Ellis, President of Boat Owners Association of the United States. I am pleased to be here today representing more than 590,000 BoatU.S. members who are recreational boat owners, including over 113,000 of whom reside in Florida where one out of every seven boat owners is a BoatU.S. member.

Many of those boaters live in southeastern Florida and cruise to the islands of the Bahamas, only to find it difficult to check in with U.S. Customs upon their return. Congressmen Mark Foley and Clay Shaw have been searching for a solution to this problem for the past few years and BOAT/U.S. believes that the provisions of H.R. 1509 will ease the burden for Florida boaters when reporting in to U.S. authorities at various Florida ports.

Mr. Chairman, I had the opportunity to experience the immigration process myself, when my wife and I returned from a trip to the Bahamas in 2003. We left West End Bahamas and returned to West Palm Beach on our trawler. Upon arrival at the marina we called U.S. Customs and after a brief wait and pleasant conversation were cleared through Customs. However, the Customs officer informed us we needed to call Immigration and clear through them as well. We called several times and after waiting on hold for what seemed like an hour we finally got through to an officer who informed us we needed to present ourselves in person at the West Palm Beach airport.

We called a cab and made our way the four miles to the airport but couldn't locate the Immigration office. After another phone call we were informed that it was located it was at the private aviation terminal in the back of the airport. The cab driver had no idea how to get there and seemed nervous about going to the Immigration office anyway. Nevertheless, we finally arrived at a poorly marked concrete building with no windows and pressed a speaker button. A very nice officer eventually appeared, took our passports and asked us to wait outside. He disappeared for ten minutes and then reappeared to return our passports. Since there were no cabs in that part of the airport we had to have our cab wait for us. The round trip fare was about \$25. By the time we returned to the boat, a half day had been used up completing this procedure.

To put this tale into context, we had gone to the Bahamas on an organized trip of 25 boats. The instructions for clearing back in were described in some materials the organizers had given us, but even so, about half of the other boaters we spoke with after the trip did not clear back in with Immigration. Some gave up after repeated phone calls; others checked in with Immigration but did not bring everyone who was aboard their vessel and others, who returned to different ports, did not want to go to the time or the expense of a long cab ride to an airport miles from port. Still others who returned from the Bahamas on Sunday did not check in because some Immigration offices are not open on Sundays. In these cases, taking a Monday off from work to report to Immigration or delaying a flight out with the added expense of an overnight hotel stay was just too much.

In our case, where we complied in as timely a manner as possible, we had to spend several hours wandering around south Florida before getting the government's official stamp of approval to clear in. Had we intended anything illegal there was plenty of time and opportunity along the way to the Immigration office.

Mr. Chairman, the current method of enforcing this regulation is inconvenient, inadequate and inefficient. Law abiding American citizens are turned into scofflaws by a system that has not changed to meet the needs of the times. Instead of turning law abiding citizens into criminals, we should embrace new or existing technologies, such as that recommended by H.R. 1509, that will get the job done in less time and less expense.

Consider the billions of dollars the Department of Homeland Security has spent on getting the latest technology for our nation's airports. They are installing iris-scan readers to identify passengers and recently unveiled a scanner that can see through a person's outer garments. They have readers that measure the unique geometry of a person's hand to protect the baggage handling area, with motion-tracking video systems to keep unauthorized people from entering the area. Even our highway's borders have adapted new technology with their NEXUS and SENTRI programs that speed vehicles through Customs checkpoints.

Unfortunately, very little has been spent on technology to secure the thousands of miles of our coastal waters. Certainly, there must be a way to leverage some of the technological advances in aviation to make our coastlines more secure while at the same time simplifying a boater's reporting procedure.

The "Recreational Boaters Streamlined Inspection Act" offers a practical way for recreational boaters to report back to customs officials after visiting the Bahamas, as well as other Caribbean islands. H.R. 1509 requires the Department Homeland Security to establish a program allowing boaters returning from outside the U.S. to use videophones at a number of Florida marinas and public docks. This plan has worked successfully in the Great Lakes for a number of years. Recreational boaters returning from visiting Canada simply pick up a videophone and complete the necessary verification in a matter of minutes. In fact, videophones have been so successful in the Great Lakes that they are now installed at over 30 locations from New York to Minnesota.

Recreational boaters are needed as eyes and ears on the water in our quest to make our homeland secure. Meaningless regulations and low compliance destroy the governments creditably and do nothing for homeland security.

While the government's reorganization combining Customs and Immigration into one Customs and Border Protection office is a step in the right direction, it still does not solve the problem of requiring a law abiding citizen to find a cab and travel miles to report into a government office in person. There has to be a simpler way for the government to protect our borders and at the same time enable law abiding citizens who pose no threat to obey the law.

I commend the committee for holding this hearing on H.R. 1509 and urge you to approve it this year so that 13 south Florida locations can have videophones installed in early 2006. Again, thank you for this holding hearing. I am happy to respond to any questions that you might have.